



Embrace Your Humanity...*Because God Does*

Psalm 103:14 David Sunday January 15, 2017

Psalm 103 is one of the most wonderful psalms of praise and thanksgiving to our great God. Let's worship Him as we hear His Word together:

*Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and all that is within me,
bless his holy name!*

² *Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits,*

³ *who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,*

⁴ *who redeems your life from the pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,*

⁵ *who satisfies you with good
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.*

⁶ *The Lord works righteousness
and justice for all who are oppressed.*

⁷ *He made known his ways to Moses,
his acts to the people of Israel.*

⁸ *The Lord is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*

⁹ *He will not always chide,
nor will he keep his anger forever.*

¹⁰ *He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.*

¹¹ *For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;*

¹² *as far as the east is from the west,
so far does he remove our transgressions from us.*

¹³ *As a father shows compassion to his children,
so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him.*

¹⁴ *For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust.*

¹⁵ *As for man, his days are like grass;
he flourishes like a flower of the field;*

¹⁶ *for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it no more.*

¹⁷ *But the steadfast love of the Lord*

*is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him,
and his righteousness to children's children,
18 to those who keep his covenant
and remember to do his commandments.
19 The Lord has established his throne in the heavens,
and his kingdom rules over all.
20 Bless the Lord, O you his angels,
you mighty ones who do his word,
obeying the voice of his word!
21 Bless the Lord, all his hosts,
his ministers, who do his will!
22 Bless the Lord, all his works,
in all places of his dominion.
Bless the Lord, O my soul!*

And let all God's people say, "Amen."

I want to anchor our hearts today in one specific verse, a verse that takes us directly to the heart of God for His children. It tells us something God remembers that all too often we forget. In fact, Ray Pritchard has a sermon based on this verse with this title: "What God Remembers That We Forget." That verse is Psalm 103:14: "*For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust.*" God remembers that we are dust. We forget it.

Back on February 1st last year, our staff went on a pastoral retreat in which we encouraged and instructed each other with lessons we were learning from a book called The Imperfect Pastor, by Zack Eswine. I trust many of you want to have an imperfect pastor—because that's all you're ever going to get. Zack Eswine says:

Every morning we should wake up and look in the mirror and recite the words of John the Baptist: "I am not the Christ." I am not omniscient. I don't know it all, and I should dispel any expectation from myself or from anyone else to the contrary.

I'm not omnipotent. I cannot fix it all. My job is to point people—myself and others—to the only Savior Who can. I am not omnipresent. I can't be everywhere at once. I cannot meet every need. And if I start trying to do that, not only will I disappoint everyone, but I will cave in on myself as well.

I am not omni-competent. I have a very modest set of gifts, which God has given me to be used to build up and edify others. But God has very wisely limited the gifts He gives to me and any one individual, so that it is impossible for any of us to succeed in what God calls us to do, unless we are relying on and working with others.

I am not the Christ.

It's very important for us to remember this, because when we forget that we are mere mortals, frail children of dust and feeble as frail, we expose ourselves to many vulnerabilities, to terrible psychoses, to great break-downs. And we rob God of the glory that belongs only to Him. Only Jesus Christ is fully God and fully Man; only Jesus can teach us what it means to be truly human in a way that brings glory to God.

That's what I want to focus our attention on this Sunday and next. I want us to see how the Bible encourages us to embrace our humanity—not to be ashamed of the fact that we are mere mortals, but to embrace that fact. You might call these two sermons a “mini-theology of weakness.” These sermons will be about our frailty, about our limitations, about our humanity, about the fact that being human and weak and limited is not something to be ashamed of, but a gift to embrace.

Today I'm encouraging you to embrace your humanity because God does. God embraces your humanity. See verse 14 again, this time out of the New Living Translation: “*For He knows how weak we are. He remembers we are only dust.*” Spurgeon said we can draw two threads out of this little verse. Thread #1, our constitution—how we're made. Thread #2, God's consideration.

Our Constitution

Let's think about our constitution as human beings for a little bit. Two words in verse 14 describe our constitution: weakness and dustiness. Frailty and dustiness. You are a weak and dusty creature—and that's okay. In fact, it's not only okay, it's very good. If you take God's Word seriously in Genesis 1-2, this is a good thing. You weak, frail children of dust, be not ashamed of your humanity.

Look at Genesis 1:26-28 and 31:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

*So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.*

And God blessed them....And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.

Genesis 2:7 goes into a little more detail about how God made human beings: “*Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of*

life, and the man became a living creature.” This is our origin. This is our constitution. Very simply, the only reason any of us is alive at all is because God formed us out of the dust, then God breathed into us His breath of life. We are *“fearfully and wonderfully made”* (Psalm 139:14)—but the wonder derives not from the fact that we are so wonderful, but that God could take something as basic and elemental as dust, and through His creative breath could form something as glorious as a human being. Only God could make this out of dust.

The glory comes from our Creator, not from our essence. The dignity comes from His image, not from our accomplishments. That’s fundamental to being human, but sometimes we as human beings compare ourselves to others. We’ll speak of certain people having an “iron constitution,” like they can do anything. But every “iron constitution” still comes from dust, and to dust it shall return (Genesis 3:19).

An old Puritan named David Dickson once wrote, “There is no more strength in man of himself that there is in the matter he was made of.” What were we made of? We were made of dust. What do you think of when you think of dust? You think of something very light, something almost invisible, something that doesn’t amount to much unless it is connected to more dust. That’s when you’ve got a problem—when there’s a lot of dust clinging together.

You think of something very finite, very frail, very fleeting. How effortlessly does a gust of wind blow away a coat of dust? Whoosh—it’s gone. And how swiftly does a human life pass away? Has there ever been a day in history when human beings have not been dying? Job reflects on this, saying, *“Man, who is born of a woman, is few of days and full of trouble. He comes out like a flower and withers; he flees like a shadow and continues not”* (Job 14:1-2).

That’s true of all of us, rich or poor, young or old, highly intelligent or high school graduate. There’s this basic weakness, this frailty, this creatureliness, this dustiness—that’s who we are. That’s our constitution. You can’t get a fitness trainer or a plastic surgeon or an essential oil that’s going to change that basic issue. We are dust and to dust we shall return.

What this means is that each and every one of us is very limited. Our time is limited. Our talents are limited. Our mental capacity and intelligence are limited. Our physical strength and energy are limited. Our emotional resilience is limited. We can’t know it all, fix it all, be at it all, or do it all. We are not the Christ. And that’s okay.

The problem is not with the fact that we are human. The problem is with the fact that we are sinful human beings. We are dust. That’s our basic constitution. That goes all the way back to creation. But that second phrase in Genesis 3:19, *“to dust we shall return”*—that’s the wages of sin. God has made a way now for our humanity to be resurrected, to be lifted to the heights of His throne, to live forever in His presence. That’s what God has done through Jesus Christ, Who

became a frail creature of dust and Who lived the life we had failed to live and Who died and rose again so that this dusty creature can be resurrected and live forever in God's glorious presence. That's the gospel. That's the good news.

But death remains in this world as a reminder that sin has brought ruin upon our humanity. And here's the trouble we have. We have a really hard time distinguishing our humanity from our sinfulness. Our humanity has become so tangled up with sin that we can't tell the difference between what's merely human and what is sinful. We can't untangle these knots that sin has caused.

That's one of the things I love about Psalm 103. This psalm is loosening that tangled knot—the tangled knot of our sinfulness and our humanness—and it's showing us that God knows all about both. He knows all about our sin and He's done something so that nothing—not even our sin—can separate us from His love. He knows all about our humanity and He wants to assure us that it is not going to separate us from His compassion.

Just look at this wonderful psalm. What is God doing in verses 8-12? He's assuring us that our sin cannot separate us from His love. Then look at verses 13-14. What do you see there? God is assuring us that our weakness and dustiness do not separate us from His compassion.

So we see our constitution. We see our weakness. We see our dustiness. Let's move now to the second thread of this message.

God's Consideration

What does God think about all of this? This tangled mess of sin and humanity that is called David Sunday? What does God think of you?

Well, verses 8-12 show us how God considers His children when we are all tangled up in our sin—if we fear Him. Did you notice that? Three times in this psalm he stresses that these good truths are for those who fear the Lord. What does that mean? It means we're looking to God to be our Savior. We have hearts that want to obey Him, even though we fail so much—and we know we fail. But we are looking to Him to be our Savior. That's what it means to fear the Lord; we want to obey Him. We want to please Him.

If that is true of you—and it's only by God's grace that it is true of you—then God wants you to know He is merciful toward you in your sin. God doesn't look at you in the web of your sin the way you look at the spider in its web. He's not out to crush you. God says to you in your sin, "I have dealt with this."

I love how Jim Nicodem up at Christ Community Church preached verses 8-12:

- God has a long fuse. He is slow to anger (8).

- God has a short memory. He does not always chide, nor will He keep His anger forever (9).
- God has a thick skin. He does not treat us as our sins deserve (10).
- God has a great heart. So great is His love, so far has He removed our sins (11-12).

This is God's heart toward us in our sin: a long fuse, a short memory, a thick skin and a great heart.

Imagine starting on a journey around the world from New York Harbor. You head east and keep sailing. Finally you land on the Normandy coast of France. You continue traveling east across Europe, over France, down into Switzerland, into the Alps, over and through the Alps. Then you go east and east and east, across eastern Europe, until finally you hit the Black Sea there on the coast of Bulgaria. Then you sail across the Black Sea, and where do you find yourself? In central Asia somewhere. You keep going through that ancient land of central Asia, through Mongolia, China. You keep traveling along that Great Wall east, east, east, east, east, until you hit the Pacific Ocean.

Then you get in a boat again and keep traveling east, hitting some little islands along the way. Then there you are in Hawaii. You go further east until you finally reach California. You keep going east and east and east and east, until you get back to New York City.

The question is: where does the east meet the west? The answer of course is never. Never. When you're heading east, you're never going to start heading west. God says, "This is what I have done with your sin. *As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.*" This is God's consideration of us. Even when we are at our very worst in our rebellion, He will not let our rebellion become a barrier between Him and His children who fear Him.

The question I'm asking today is: if that's how God treats us when we are at our very worst in our sinfulness, can we not be confident of God's mercy toward us in our weakness? In our humanity? When we're frail and sick? When we're getting old and we don't remember things as well as we used to? When we can't perform in our jobs the way we want to? When we get a C- instead of an A+ on the exam we studied so hard for? Does God hate us because of our frailty and weakness? Does He feel toward us what we often feel toward ourselves? No. Verse 13: "*As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him.*"

Let me tell you an assumption I make every time I come to preach. I assume there's someone out there who is completely disgusted with himself or herself. Every time I come to

preach, I assume there are quite a few people in the congregation who are feeling that way—disgusted with yourselves. I also assume this truth. I assume that 90% of you have come to church on some day in your life feeling that way. Maybe you've seen the communion table set up and you think, "No way. I'm so disgusted with myself. I can't draw near to God like that."

There are probably a few of you who rarely come to church not feeling disgusted with yourselves. That's the way some of us tend to be quite often. Sometimes that disgust is related to our sin. There's a good reason for it. Sometimes that disgust is due to failing to embrace our humanity. We're trying to be something other than frail children of dust. We hate our frailty. We're ashamed of our weakness. We feel like we should be stronger than we are, fitter than we are, more capable, less limited.

So we chafe against our limitations and chastise ourselves for not being perfect. I'm telling you today, friends, that this mindset of self-reproach isn't just a little problem. This is a big problem. It's a huge hindrance to developing a close relationship with God. I'm saying that if we do not embrace our humanity—the way God has made us as frail creatures of dust—if we do not accept our limitations as part and parcel of how God made us, then we will fail to appreciate God's great heart toward us as His children.

Sam Storms says this: "We run from God rather than to Him because we know our own hearts all too well and His barely at all." Psalm 103 is here to help us get to know His heart better than we even know our own. What does Sam Storms mean by that? He means we're constantly coming up against our weaknesses and limitations, which are all tangled up with our sinfulness and we're constantly dealing with that.

None of us has gotten everything accomplished this week that we hoped to accomplish. Most of us are already behind on our New Year's resolutions. Every one of us has experienced our sinfulness this week. We haven't read the Bible as much as we should have or wanted to—or thought we wanted to. We haven't prayed like we thought we should. We've repeated sins for which we have repented—and now we've done it again. We've been ungrateful and presumptuous. And a lot of us a lot of the time feel like we're pretty lousy Christians.

Sam Storms continues with these words: "The inescapable and undeniable knowledge that we have of ourselves is a persistent roadblock to the pursuit of intimacy with God. The contempt and disdain in which we hold ourselves makes it ever so difficult to seek out an infinitely holy and righteous God." That is true. Here's what happens. When we are disgusted with ourselves, we often assume God is disgusted with us too. We think God finds us so repulsive there's no way He would want to have a relationship with us.

But then look at Psalm 103. Is that what you see there? Do you not see in this psalm a call to be amazed at God's grace, to be surprised at how considerate He is of your limitations, to realize that your weakness and your limitedness—and even your sinfulness—is not there to drive you away from God, but that God is inviting you to draw near to Him with all your frailty and your feebleness and even your failures?

I read Psalm 103 and I think, “Hey, what if God is not as disgusted with me as I am with myself? What if God is appealing to me—and to you—through this psalm, inviting us to draw near to Him, assuring us that our condition does not repulse Him, but rather evokes compassion, pity and tender love from His heart toward us? You might say, “Oh, that sounds good, David, but is that biblical?”

Yes. Just look at verses 13 and 14. Isn't that the logic of these verses? Why does a father show compassion? Why does the Lord show compassion to those who fear Him like a father does to his children? Why is God so “*merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness*” (Exodus 34:6)? Verse 14 tells us why. It's because He knows us. And what God knows about us does not repel Him from us.

In the words of an old Puritan, He knows all about “the feebleness of our understanding, the strength of our fears, the shattered state of our nerves, the violence of our temptations, our readiness to sink into melancholy, and everything calling for tender compassion.” God knows all about that in us.

But His knowledge of our frailty and weakness does not cause Him to think less of us—it causes Him to think more of us. He does not mock us, scorn us, ignore us, distance Himself from us, or go looking for some stronger, fitter, more beautiful, more capable people to have a family with. God says, “It's just the opposite, dear ones.” What God knows about your frailty, your feebleness and your failures draws forth from His heart the sweetest, most tender compassion.

That's our God! That word “compassion” is so beautiful in verse 13. The Old Testament scholar J. Alec Motyer taught me that this word compassion in verse 13 comes from the same word group as the word “womb.” Look at what this wonderful British scholar, who just died this past August, says:

God's attitude toward us is one of perfect parenthood, of father and mother all in one, Joseph as well as Mary... [His] love is an over-arching, constant, powerful, active love. It is a saving love, taking our sins from us, bearing them away to a place that is ever infinitely beyond reach... And it is a fullness of love, a love that lacks nothing that makes true, perfect love what it is ... A love of welcome, protection, warmth and strength; passion and steadfastness in equal proportions.

That is how God not only thinks, but feels toward His children. It's like a mother and her feeling for the children of her womb. This is not only how God thinks and feels; it's how God acts toward His children, toward those who fear Him. Why does He do this? Why is He so compassionate to us? It's because He knows our frame. It's because He remembers that we are dust. God remembers what we forget. We try to be something other than the weak and frail and dusty creatures that we are. We think we need to prove something to God or to ourselves.

But God says to us, "Oh, no. I know all about how weak you are, and I still love you. I have compassion on you with a fullness of love, a love that lacks nothing, that makes true perfect love what it is. I love you with a love of welcome and protection and warmth and strength. I love you with passion and steadfastness in equal proportions." That is the love of our God, and it is the love we see displayed in our Savior Jesus, Who did not just look down upon our frailty and dustiness and feel pity from afar, but Who Himself came down and became a frail creature of dust. He died on the cross and rose again in glorified humanity so He could lift our humanity to the heights of God's throne.

Truly there's no love like the love of Jesus, friends, and you are loved with that kind of love. You are loved by Him as your Savior. God has so fully embraced your humanity—why don't you embrace your humanity as well? Why don't you get used to being limited, frail and weak, and not try to cover it up or be ashamed of it?

What might that look like in practice? Let's consider a few applications.

If we would remember what God remembers, these would be the effects.

If we remember what God remembers—that we are but dust—and we embrace that, here are the effects it would have on our lives:

1. It would dispel pride. Why? Because our dignity is derivative, not inherent. It is borrowed, not original. It comes from the One Who made us. If ever we exalt ourselves over Him, He knows how to bring us low. He remembers that we are but dust. He says to all those who walk in pride these solemn words in Isaiah 2:12, 17:

For the Lord of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up—and it shall be brought low....And the haughtiness of man shall be humbled, and the lofty pride of men shall be brought low, and the Lord alone will be exalted in that day.

Then Isaiah concludes with these words in verse 22: "Stop regarding man in whose nostrils is breath, for of what account is he?" In ourselves we're nothing. And knowing this

truth should dispel pride. Notice, this truth of God having compassion on us in our weakness applies to us not only on our very worst days, but on our very best days.

When Michael Phelps, the most decorated Olympian ever, won his 23rd gold medal, God did not say, “Michael doesn’t need My compassion right now, because he is so strong and mighty.” No. At that very moment, when Michael was winning his 23rd gold medal, God was saying, “I have compassion on him, because I know how weak he is. He’s but dust.”

This truth should dispel pride.

2. It would drive us to pray. In all our limitations and frustrations with our humanity, in all the failures of our sin, what is God saying? He’s saying, “Draw near to Me.” In fact, God is saying, “Your limitations—the fact that you can’t be everywhere and do everything and know everything, and you’re always bumping up against your weakness—these are gifts.” They’re gifts from God to you to remind you that apart from Him you can do nothing. You need Him every hour and He wants you to live in moment-by-moment dependence upon Him. This truth drives us to pray. And if we don’t pray, it’s because we don’t believe this truth. We think we’re stronger than we really are.

Listen to this quote from a book called Beloved Dust, by Jamin Goggin and Kyle Strobel: “It is exceptionally foolish to embrace prayerlessness instead of a life of prayer. To know you are dust is to know you need to pray. To grasp the one is to grasp the other.” If you don’t know you need to pray, you’ve forgotten who you really are.

3. It would deliver us from perfectionism. If we grasped these truths, remembering what God does not forget, it would deliver us from the thought that we have to be perfect in order to be acceptable to Him. No way. Jesus has dealt with that on the cross. Jesus has clothed you in His righteousness. Now God says to you, “Your imperfect obedience brings Me pleasure. Don’t try to be perfect—just walk by faith and gratitude, living for Me.”

I read about a ceramics teacher who said, “I’m going to divide this class into two groups. All those on the left side, you’re going to be graded solely on the quantity of your work. All those on the right, you’re going to be graded by the quality of your work. On the final day of class I’m going to bring in bathroom scales, and I’m going to weigh the work of the quantity group. If you get 50 pounds of pots, that’s an A. Forty pounds, that’s a B.” But to the quality group, he said, “You only need to produce one pot, but it has to be perfect to get an A.”

So they went about their work. The grading came and a curious fact emerged. The works of highest quality were found in the quantity group, not the quality group. And here’s what the study concluded: It seems that while the quantity group was busily churning out piles of work and learning from their mistakes, the quality group had sat around theorizing about perfection—

and in the end had little more to show for their efforts than grandiose theories and a pile of dead clay.

What a great application to the Christian life! Some of us are sitting around trying to be perfect, and in the process—knowing how limited we are and how imperfect we are—we’re not doing much. Then there are other people who realize, “God, You’re merciful and compassionate toward me. You’ve already dealt with my sins and failures through Jesus on the cross. So I’m just going to get to work for You. I’m going to love and enjoy You. I’m going to be confident that You take pleasure in my work, because You receive me in Your Son.”

This truth of embracing your humanity delivers you from perfectionism.

4. It would draw us to be more patient with one another, if we really believed what God believes about us. As we think about this truth, I want to ask you right now: is there anyone in your life on whom you are being too hard? Is there anyone in your life from whom you are withholding compassion and kindness because you can’t stop noticing their faults? They’re so glaring to you that you always have to point out what’s wrong with this person. Are their limitations and humanity and failures and feebleness frustrating you?

Maybe it’s a son or a daughter, or a friend who let you down. Maybe they missed an appointment or forgot your birthday. Maybe they have a different opinion about something than you have. You’re not seeing eye to eye. The question I have for us today is do we have a right to always chide someone else and point out their weaknesses, when God does not always chide us, when God is so compassionate toward us? Do we have a right to withhold compassion from our spouse or from our son or daughter or neighbor, when God our Father has such immeasurable and unfailing compassion on us?

When you see someone else’s weakness, do you remember what God remembers about you? Do you remember how tender He is toward you? If you do, how can you not go and do likewise?

Let’s pray.

Lord, help us to embrace what You embrace. For those who are laboring under a sense of feeling disgusted right now, deliver us, Lord, from perfectionism and pride. Help us to rest in who we are in Christ and find refuge in Him alone. Thank You for Your great compassion toward us, Lord. We receive it—we need it. We love You, Lord. Amen.

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